DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 378 525 CS 011 944

AUTHOR McCabe, Don
TITLE A Common Sense Approach to Controlled Word Lists. AVKO "Great Idea" Reprint Series No. 604. Revised Edition.
INSTITUTION AVKO Educational Research Foundation, Clio, MI.
PUB DATE 82
NOTE 15p.; For other documents in this series, see CS 011 943-960.
AVAILABLE FROM AVKO Educational Research Foundation, 3084 W. Willard Rd., Clio, MI 48420-7801 ($1; quantity discounts available).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Elementary Secondary Education; Language Experience Approach; *Reading Instruction; Reading Strategies; *Word Lists; *Word Recognition
IDENTIFIERS *Words

ABSTRACT

The premise of this booklet is that reading should be taught from the beginning to all students with the techniques and materials and orders of presentation that have been found to be effective in remediation, such as the concept of controlled lists. It is "common sense" to teach words in such lists in phonic context, rather than the phonic isolation common to many commercially available word lists. The standard Language Experience Approach (LEA) can be modified to teach students systematically words in both phonic and sentence context. To put controlled lists into effective use, keep the number of new irregular or sight words to a minimum, give maximum exposure to "known" words, introduce "word families" one at a time, and gradually introduce sight words from grades 1-12. It is the least frequently used word families or phonic principles that need the most drilling. Frequency of appearance is a starting place to pick the sight words and word families to teach, and to determine in what order. (Contains 14 references.) (RS)

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A Common Sense Approach to Controlled Word Lists

by

Don McCabe

AVKO "Great Idea"
Reprint Series #604

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Let's Use a Common Sense Approach to Controlled Word Lists

by

Don McCabe

This article first appeared in the
AVKO Foundation Newsletter, February 1979

A Revised Edition

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What is AVKO?

AVKO is a non-profit tax-exempt membership organization.

AVKO was founded in 1974.

AVKO is subsidized by donations and grants.

AVKO is open to membership to anyone interested in helping others learn to read and write.

AVKO is run by members from as far away as Hawaii and Quebec.

AVKO's daily operations are handled by volunteers.

AVKO plans to build and operate a model reading research center in a **year-around** *camp* setting that would economically and efficiently service the needs of dyslexics of all ages.

AVKO hopes to spread the concept that parent and spouse tutoring in spelling/reading skills can be successfully taught in adult community education classes and that members of a problem readers support group can greatly assist the efforts of any volunteer tutor working in the literacy movement.

AVKO provides newsletters and economical opportunities to pursue individual research projects and to take part in large scale cooperative research projects that have immediate practical applications.

AVKO is attempting to accomplish these goals primarily through the profits generated by the inservices, workshops, and the sale of materials developed for the special needs of students, parents, and adults -- but AVKO still needs donations to survive.

Let's Use a Common Sense Approach to Controlled Word Lists

Word lists from Dolch's to Wilson's have one thing in common. They are misused by publishers (or writers) of basal readers, textbooks, spelling books, and supplementary texts.

The primary object of any series of books should be to help **all** children master the art of reading. By and large, the bright children learn regardless of the series or the approach used by the text or the teacher. What is needed are regular basal readers designed for the slow students -- not the mythical average. These books should be for **all**!

Today, the supplementary materials are generally designed for the slow. We at AVKO feel that the *mainstream* materials should be designed so that the slowest of our students can master the materials. In the same vein, we feel that the supplementary materials should be for the "gifted" or advanced so that they do not become discipline problems out of boredom.

PREMISE: Reading should be taught from the beginning to all students with the techniques and materials and orders of presentation that have been found to be effective in remediation.

By *effective* we mean methods such as Orton-Gillingham or Slingerland that have been used to help illiterates learn to read well enough to do college work. We do not mean those methods that are effective *only* in bringing students up to about the 4th or 5th grade reading level.

The basic concept of controlled lists is irrefutably sound. The reason for having a list is to help a student *master* the reading of words and phrases through heavy repetition without too many new words interfering with the mastery process.

However, the controlled list is only as good as the words chosen. And this is where *common sense* must be applied.

QUESTION: Which word should be taught first?

pitch	itch	ditch	witch	bewitch
switch	snitch	nitch	britches	kitchen
twitches	pitcher	stitches		

QUESTION: Did you make your choice? If not, would you please pick the word you would teach first before you continue reading.

If you take almost any list of the 500 words most commonly found in children's readers, only one of those words appears. Can you guess which one it is?

QUESTION: Isn't learning a word in the context of a story still learning to read a word in **phonic isolation** if no other word in its family is learned?

QUESTIONS: Of the "-itch" family words listed above, is there any word that a student of any age is incapable of learning? We think not. Is there one word that is perhaps a trifle more difficult because it contains a "FANCY" phonic pattern? We think so. And that word is *kitchen* which has the same last two letters as *ten*, *Len*, *wren*, and *Ben*, etc., but has a different sound for those letters.

Yet *kitchen* is the word that is taught first if the controlled frequency principle is used.

The word *itch* doesn't even occur in any list of the 3,000 most frequently used words no matter whose list you use. And there is no expert in the reading field that can convince us that the word *itch* is not in every child's speaking and listening vocabulary.

We feel that if one wants to teach the most frequently used words first, fine, but let's use *common sense*. There cannot be anything wrong with learning other words on the way.

It is simple **common sense** to teach the words *itch* and *pitch* and *ditch* and *witch* and maybe even *bewitched* at the same time that you are teaching the word *kitchen*.

For those who wish a more scientific (jargon-laden) explanation, the teaching of many *-itch* words provides easier instantiation of its phonemic/graphemic schemata.

To teach kitchen one year and wait until two or three years later to teach another *-itch* family word is teaching in **PHONIC ISOLATION.**

Teaching words in lists by families is teaching in **PHONIC CONTEXT.** Teaching words in phonic context is every bit as important as learning in sentence or story context. Common sense will tell you that phonic and sentence context do not have to be mutually exclusive.

A number of good remedial teachers have modified the standard Language Experience Approach (LEA) to systematically teach students words in both phonic *and* sentence context.

This modification came about as a result of seeing student dictated stories ending up just as dull as any "See Spot Run" story. To avoid that pitfall but still take advantage of the natural motivational aspects of having students learn reading from their own language, through the backdoor of composition, these teachers started asking students to come up with sentences using phonically patterned words. These teachers would then write the sentence on the board and their students would copy it and use it for reading. A variation some teachers use is to have the students try to spell the sentence correctly. This way, each student corrects immediately his/her own mistakes and learns from the mistakes without fear of the "monster red pencil."

The following is a sample "Word Families in Sentence Context" Language Experience Chart. The teacher first made a list of some of the "*-ace*" family words but made certain to have *-s, -ed,* and *-ing* forms as well. Then he had his students compete for the best or funniest sentence.

ace	Snoopy likes to pretend he is a World War I flying ace.
aces	In the game of poker, a pair of aces beats a pair of kings.
aced	Linda aced her history test.
acing	She is always acing a test.
face	Let's face it. Nobody knows everything.
faces	She has more faces than Eve.
faced	You shouldn't call anyone two-faced.
facing	It's about time we started facing up to the facts.
lace	Does anybody have an extra shoe lace?
laces	I really hate breaking my shoe laces, especially when I'm in a hurry.

laced	Dave really laced into that kick.
lacing	He is always lacing into somebody.
place	What kind of a place does a king live in? A palace place!
places	Did you save any places for us?
placed	John won the race, but I placed third.
placing	Placing second or third is almost as good as winning
race	It's no disgrace to lose a race.
races	Now we're off to the races.

PLEASE NOTE: In that partial *Language Experience Chart* you just finished reading, only the words place and race are among the 500 most frequently used words (in the -ace family, that is).

These sentences can be used later on for individual tutoring. They can be made into student books for other classes to use. They can be made into transparencies with the target family word flashed tachistoscopically. The sentences can be used for class choral reading with the "galloping" finger producing what amounts to group "neurological impress."

How to Put Controlled Lists to Effective Use

1. Keep the number of new irregular or sight words such as *does* or *was* or *were* to a minimum. Tell the students that these are "outlaws" because they don't follow phonic rules, or you can tell them that these words are simply "insane" because their spellings don't make any sense. In any case, these words must be *overlearned*.

2. Give maximum exposure to the "known" words so mastery is achieved.

3. Introduce word families one at a time. Make sure that they are easy and fun to learn as well as having one or more of the most frequently used words. After a family is learned, introduce a new family but continue to review the other families so they can become *mastered*.

4. Continue introducing sight words gradually from grades 1 through 12. Whoa! Sight words in grade 12! Yes, you read that right. How can any student be expected to correctly read words such as solder, ("SAH dur"), lingerie ("Lahn zhur RAY"), hors d'oeuvre ("ohr DURV"), quay ("KEE"), pot pourri ("POH poor ree"), lough ("lahk"), and Qin ("chin") -- unless these words have been systematically taught to them.

QUESTION: Is there a listing of sight words with a suggested order of presentation?

ANSWER: Yes. Send a self-addressed stamped envelope & .50 to the AVKO Educational Research Foundation, 3084 W. Willard Rd., Birch Run, MI 48415-9444 and request a copy of *#616 - Suggested Order of Diagnosis & Remediation of Type #3 Words - The "INSANE."*

QUESTION: I understand the need for a slow controlled introduction of sight words. But aren't all these "outlaws" or "insane" words learned by most students by the time they get to the fourth grade?

ANSWER: No. Only the simplest and most frequently used "outlaws" have been learned. The suggested order starts with the word *again* and ends with *wont* as in, "It is my *wont* to play word games."

There isn't anything sacred about the suggested order. I am not about to dictate when an "INSANE" word like *victuals* should be taught. I was forty years old with three college degrees behind me and a recognized "authority" in the reading field before I "incidentally/accidentally" discovered that the "VIC chew ulz" in my reading vocabulary meaning food (What *rich* people called food) was really the same word as my "vittles" which had always been in my Shanty Irish vocabulary. When I found this out, I felt as foolish as my friend who told me that he was in his senior year in college before he realized that the philosopher he kept reading about ("Sew Crates") was really the same philosopher he had heard about, "Sock ruh tease" (Socrates).

That is why I emphatically believe that every student should at least be given the opportunity to learn those "INSANE" words such as *victuals*, *blackguard* ("BLAG gurd"), *ouija* (WEE jee), *ciao* ("chow"), *chic* ("sheek"), *gaol* (jail) etc. These words should not be left for "incidental/accidental learning. Personally, I think it's far more important to be able to read the words of our language than to write phony term papers on the symbolism in Silas Marner -- which, by the way, I am guilty of -- both doing and assigning. *Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa.*

QUESTION: I understand the need for a slow controlled introduction of word families. But aren't all these word families learned by most students by the time they get to the fourth grade?

ANSWER: No. Only the "SIMPLE" word families such as -at, -ell, -ig, -old, -un, -ame, -eve, -ite, -ome, ude, -aid, -east, -oat, -uel, -ool, -eel, -ield, -oil, -awl, -all, and -out families are generally learned by most students by the fourth grade. It is the "FANCY" word families that are not taught such as:

ous	=	"us" as in	nervous, marvelous, glamorous
al	=	"ul" as in	personal, fatal, total
on	=	"un" as in	apron, London, onion
ci	=	"sh" as in	precious,special, suspicion
ti	=	"sh" as in	nutritious, initial, ambition
i	=	Long E as in	Mimi, debris, esprit
que	=	"k" as in	cheques, unique, grotesque

The educational consultants for our major publishers seem to ignore the fact that it is the *least frequently used* word families or phonic principles that need the *most* drilling. In many ways it's like learning names. I don't need to be drilled on the names of the members of my family or my close friends. I see them all the time. I use their names all the time. I don't forget them. But there are names of people I should know even if I only see them once or twice a year. It's *their* names I must drill on.

And oh, how people hate to have their name mispronounced. McCabe rhymes with Abe and I don't like being called McCab or Macabre. Other names that should not be mispronounced (if taught) are: Jacques Rousseau, Jean Pierre Cousteau, Jesus Jose Garcia, and Sean Meagher. Give this paragraph to any average (C or B) high school student to read. Unless they come from a community in which those names are common, the students will mangle the pronunciations.

The point is that we do not (*but should*) systematically teach:

ou = "OO" as in *routine* not just "ow" as in *out*.
eau = Long O as in *bureau*, *plateau*, and *chateau*.
j = h as in Jose, Baja, and the common Spanish name Jesus ("Hey Zeus!).
er = "air" as in *perish Bering* and *inherit*.

The excuse given by representatives of the publishing industry and their consultants is that the extremely low frequency and foreign origins does not warrant their inclusion.

While it is true that the **-eau** pattern is almost non-existent in children's basal readers, it is ubiquitous in menus, personnel directories, newspapers, catalogs, and maps. All I ask is that we attempt to teach our language systematically and rationally with gobs and gobs of common sense.

It doesn't make sense to leave the hardest of words for kids with learning problems to learn on their own. We must *teach* our language and not just leave it to be picked up accidentally and incidentally as we grow older.

QUESTION: Can it be done?

ANSWER: Yes. First we must apply a little common sense to the frequency studies. We can use them as a starting place to pick which sight words and which word families to teach and in which order.

This does not mean that we must follow a rigid path taking the frequency counts as gospel. For example, the word *pony* is on most of these high frequency lists. Really, *pony* is only on these lists because the story writers like to write about *ponies*, especially in the Dick and Jane variety upon which most of these studies were based. The word *pony* should be taught with *Tony* and even the *Sony*, but it doesn't have to be presented in the first 500 words or even the first 5,000 words for that matter.

Any word or word family can be delayed or moved up depending upon its *utility* in teaching. For example, the *-umber* words occur in the first 500, but not the *-um*. Reason: The word *number* is constantly used in the grade school workbooks and texts. While frequency counts might suggest that we should teach the words *number*, *lumber*, *slumber*, and *cucumber* before we teach the -um words, I maintain that common sense dictates that just prior to or along with the teaching of the *-umber* words we should teach words such as: *bum*, *gum*, *hum*, *rum*, *sum*, *chum*, *plum*, *drum*, *slum*, *strum*, *glum*, and *scum*.

Who cares if any one particular -um word isn't all that common. If we added all of their individual occurences together, perhaps the -um family is more common than the -umber. In any case, we should be the master of the lists, not the lists our masters.

Suggested Readings

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